

A HISTORICAL CASE OF IMPULSIVE MONOMANIA.

BY EDWARD C. SPITZKA, M.D.

IN reading a recent sketch of Samuel Johnson's life, I was struck by the marked evidences of mental aberration exhibited by that writer, according to the account given by his biographer.* It has been the fashion among English alienists to study historical illustrations of insanity, and it would be remarkable if the very curious case of Samuel Johnson had escaped their scrutiny. However, the only reference to his mental state which occurs to me, does not deal with its salient points, and I am unacquainted with any article which mentions Johnson as an illustration of impulsive monomania (*Primære Verruecktheit in Zwangsvorstellungen*). At some risk of unconsciously repeating what may have been already said, I shall briefly comment upon his case.

Samuel Johnson suffered from a hereditary taint as well as from severe physical disease. It is known that his mother took him to London to be touched by the Queen for the "King's Evil," and that this disease (whatever it was) had seriously impaired his eyesight.

His father was tormented by hypochondriacal tendencies, and it appears that Samuel himself exhibited the same

* Leslie Stephen's life of Johnson, in "English Men of Letters," published by Harper & Bros.

symptom. Among the signs of heredity, I regard Samuel Johnson's total insensibility to music. This feature has been frequently observed as a transmitted peculiarity in families afflicted with insanity.*

The evident symptoms of impulsive monomania in Johnson were the following: When entering the doorway with his blind companion, Mrs. Williams, he would suddenly desert her in order to whirl and twist about in strange gesticulations; this performance appeared as of the nature of a superstitious ceremonial, and he would stop in a street or the middle of a room to go through it correctly. Once he collected a laughing mob in Twickenham meadows by his antics. On this occasion his hands imitated the motions of a jockey riding at full speed, his feet twisting in and out to make heels and toes touch alternately. He presently sat down and took out a Grotius "*De Veritate*" over which he "see-sawed" so violently that the mob ran back to see what was the matter.

Once in such a fit he suddenly twisted off the shoe of a lady who sat by him. Sometimes, as his biographers add, "he seemed to be obeying some hidden impulse," which commanded him to touch every post in a street or tread on the centre of every paving-stone, and he would return and go over it again if the task had not been accurately performed.

The only alienist who refers to Johnson seems to imply that he was of sound mind. In his article on "Delusions and Hallucinations," Ray† says: "We know very well that hallucinations have been exhibited by men of great mental endowments and activity, *as insulated facts having little or no connection with the ordinary mental movements.* Dr.

* Muhr: *Archiv für Psychiatrie*, vi.

In two cases of transmitted constitutional insanity, in one of which, lack of the musical sense was noted, in the other, nothing being known on this head, I found the *striæ medullares acustici* altogether absent.

† Contributions to Mental Pathology, by Isaac Ray. Boston, 1873.

Johnson, while walking in the street, thought he heard the voice of his mother, then many miles away, calling to him 'Sam, Sam.' Further on, our author states that "In most, if not all of these cases, there was undoubtedly some cerebral defect,"—but the interesting facts here detailed must have been unknown to him, as I infer from the italicized lines. In fact, on page 544, the same author says: "By no English writer have the delusions of pure monomania been more truthfully represented than by Dr. Johnson in 'Rasselas,'—an achievement *we should hardly have expected from one whose own mental movements were of the most regular and measured character.*" (Italics mine.)

The fact referred to is a proof of the great family relationship existing between delusional and impulsive monomania, and the ability to throw himself into the rôle of a delusional monomaniac is not to be wondered at in Johnson, who had imperative conceptions and hallucinations himself.

It displays a good insight into Johnson's character on the part of his biographer when the latter states, of Johnson, "if he had gone through the excitement of a religious conversion, he would probably have ended his days in a mad-house."

It was said by those who knew him during life, and this is confirmed by such writings as he left behind him, that although a man of deep power of feeling and of acute perception, yet that his views were very narrow. While one may question whether it would be just to consider his well-known antipathy to everything Scotch as a symptom of insanity, yet his bigotry on the question of the Stuart dynasty was, to say the least, remarkable in a man of otherwise high intellectual standing, being utterly out of harmony with his time, surroundings and interests, not to say the dictates of common sense.

Johnson was a man of fitful energy, and his fits of industry alternated with long periods of indolence.

Many impulsive and even delusional monomaniacs possess these same traits, and the faculty of rude repartee which Johnson had is not by any means rare in the asylum corridor. Like Johnson, there are patients in asylums and out of them, who have a prodigious memory, have accumulated vast stores of miscellaneous learning, are versatile, and would pass, as Johnson did, for nothing more than "eccentric."

Had Samuel Johnson lived in the state of New York in the present time and proved disagreeable to his relatives, or had he performed his antics on Broadway, who doubts that he would have been committed to an asylum with the evidences of impulsive insanity so palpably evident as they were in his case? Who can help but register a protest against the indiscriminate committing power which courts and physicians possess, and which every now and again consigns people with no evidences of insanity greater than those of Johnson, with good if not as good mental endowments, useful members of society often, to the living tomb of an asylum, and to the tender mercies of perhaps an ex-horse-car conductor, ex-night-watchman or other politician.

Another valuable lesson to be drawn from the case of Samuel Johnson is the strong proof it constitutes of the existence of partial insanities. His moral faculties were of the highest order, his perceptions were acute, his memory prodigious, his judgment was looked up to by his contemporaries,—in short, his only evident derangement was that manifested in his morbid impulses. The excessive fear of death, I attach but little weight to, in his case.